

AU/ACSC/SELLERS/AY10

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE  
AIR UNIVERSITY

**LATIN AMERICA AND WMDS: ARE THEY INVOLVED?**

by

Bena E. Sellers, Major, United States Air Force

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Dr. Robert Norton

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

March 2010

### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government or the Department of Defense. In accordance with Air Force Instruction 51-303, it is not copyrighted, but is the property of the United States government.

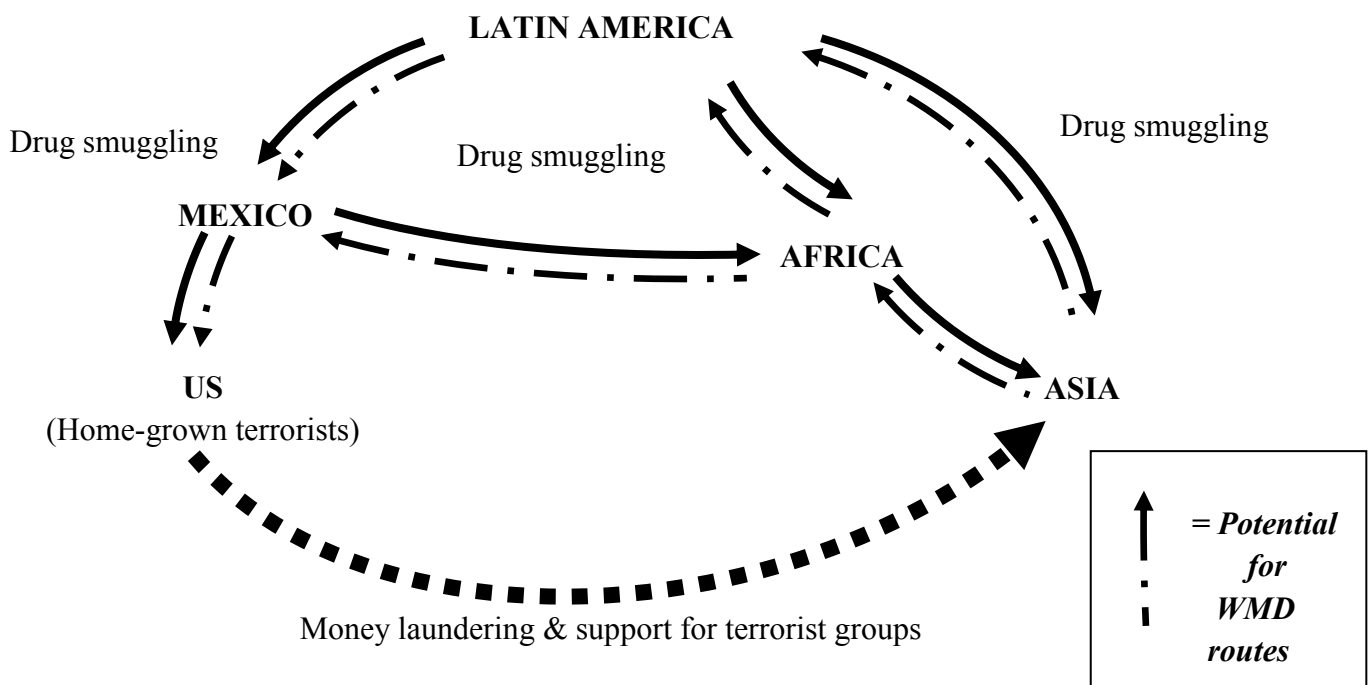
## **Abstract**

There is a large quantity of disjointed information available on the internet regarding terrorist organizations and their affiliations with drug trafficking organizations; none of which indicates a current WMD link. The absence of a “smoking gun,” however should not prevent the US or other concerned nations from remaining vigilant. It is plausible links such as the ones described in this study that may eventually prove opportune to the adversary.

## SUMMARY

Since before the events of 9/11, the US government has attempted to identify and root out terrorist organizations at the source. As the government has commenced this search, information has surfaced refuting, definitively confirming, or reflecting a highly plausible relationship that supports the terrorists' objectives. Among other things, this information has led to arrests and prosecution of the individuals involved, economic sanctions, tighter regulations, and border controls where appropriate.

This study endeavored to determine if open source material exists to substantiate how weapons of mass destruction (WMD) materials might be routed between Latin America and Asia. While no concrete data was found indicating that WMD materials *are* routed between the two regions, the *potential* for WMD routes does exist based on current drug trafficking routes and active criminal/terrorist networks. Additionally, this study briefly details how the money and support generated from home-grown terrorists in the US may be used to fund the terrorist effort. The diagram below graphically depicts the relationships to be discussed in the following sections.



## FINDINGS

5 reports from the United States, the Caribbean Community, and Europe indicate drug trafficking routes from Latin America through Africa to the European/Asian regions. The existence of these routes provides the opportunity for WMDs to be transported. The profits earned from the drug trade would serve as the means for WMDs to be purchased and transferred from one location to the next. Furthermore, each of these terrorist organizations, although their strength has decreased over the years, is still a viable terrorist group with which to contend today.

- The terrorist groups involved were the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM), and Hezbollah<sup>1</sup>
- Both the network and the route exist for WMDs to be transported along any one of the Balkan route variants noted by Arasli<sup>2</sup>
- Arrests of three Al Qaeda associates in December of 2009, following their agreement to transport cocaine through West and North Africa en route to Spain under the protection of Al

---

<sup>1</sup> Liana Sun Wyler and Nicolas Cook, *Illegal Drug Trade in Africa: Trends and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress R40838, September 30, 2009, 3-4, [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40838.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40838.pdf). U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), "Three Al Qaeda Associates Arrested on Drug and Terrorism Charges," press release, December 18, 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr121809.html>. The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and The United States Department of Energy (DOE), "Domestic Export Controls and Maritime Security Workshop in support of the Implementation of UNSCR 1540" June 15-17, 2009, [http://www.stimson.org/MAB/pdf/Kingston\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.stimson.org/MAB/pdf/Kingston_Summary.pdf). Jahangir Arasli, "The Rising Wind: Is the Caucasus Emerging as a Hub for Terrorism, Smuggling, and Trafficking?" *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Volume VI, No. 1, (Spring 2007): 24 [https://consortium.pims.org/filestore2/download/3688/The%20Rising%20Wind\\_ARASLI.pdf](https://consortium.pims.org/filestore2/download/3688/The%20Rising%20Wind_ARASLI.pdf). "The Instrument for Stability — Multi-annual Indicative Programme 2009-2011," Commission of the European Communities (Brussels, August 4, 2009): 12, [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/what/security-conflict/documents/ifs\\_2009\\_2011\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/what/security-conflict/documents/ifs_2009_2011_en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Arasli, "The Rising Wind," 30.

Qaeda, provide “proof of the direct link between dangerous terrorist organizations, including Al Qaeda, and international drug trafficking that fuels their violent activities”<sup>3</sup>

- Self-propelled semi-submersibles (SPSSs) used to smuggle cocaine into the Caribbean region are built in the areas of the jungle controlled by the FARC, a terrorist organization recognized as the world’s largest supplier of cocaine<sup>4</sup>
- Since 2007, “DEA has identified at least nine top-tier South American and Mexican drug trafficking organizations that have established operations in Africa.”<sup>5</sup> The presence of these organizations in the African region are clear indicators of an existing drug trafficking relationship

1 report from the US identifies a connection between Latin America (Venezuela especially) and Iran and then a correlating relationship between Iran and the Lebanese terrorist organization, Hezbollah.

- Since 2007, weekly flights have occurred between the two countries. This poses a potential weakness to be exploited by the terror networks, since only “ cursory immigration and customs controls” are enforced on these flights<sup>6</sup>
- Iran has been a long-time supporter of Hezbollah, providing arms and money. Thus, the mere fact that Iran has ramped up its interest and activities in Latin America is cause for concern in the US<sup>7</sup>

Coupling the reports annotated above with this latest report, one is able to envision three networks primed for WMD transports: one extending from Latin America through Africa to

---

<sup>3</sup> DEA, “Three Al Qaeda Associates Arrested.”

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Dept of Foreign Affairs and DOE, “Domestic Export Controls, 4, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Wyler and Cook, *Illegal Drug Trade in Africa*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Mark P. Sullivan, *Latin America: Terrorism Issues*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress RS21049, January 25, 2010, 6, [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RS21049.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RS21049.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 9.

Asia, a direct route from Latin America to Asia, and finally a route from Mexico through Africa to Asia.

To make the connection from Latin America to the United States, this study presents 1 report from the US which reveals a link between Latin American terrorist organizations and Mexican drug trafficking organizations.

- Based on associations uncovered by the Colombian government, its defense minister declared that Mexican drug trafficking organizations were buying cocaine directly from the FARC<sup>8</sup>

3 reports from the US indicate existing drug transit routes from Mexico and the potential for terrorists to utilize these routes for transporting biological weapons into the US.

- In 2009, Mexican officials acting on information provided by the DEA as a part of a San Diego tunnel task force discovered a 1,000 foot tunnel equipped with lighting, ventilation, and an elevator, extending from within Tijuana to more than 860 feet into the US<sup>9</sup>
- “There is nothing to stop terrorists from exploiting these kinds of vulnerabilities in border control in pursuit of their causes”<sup>10</sup>
- To date, an Al Qaeda recruiter has released a video threatening to smuggle biological weapons into the US via tunnels such as the one mentioned above. Furthermore, Hezbollah has

---

<sup>8</sup> John Rollins, Liana Sun Wyler, and Seth Rosen, *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Threats, Policy, and Considerations*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress R41004, January 25, 2010, 10, 18, [www.fas.org/srg/crs/terror/R41004.pdf](http://www.fas.org/srg/crs/terror/R41004.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “U.S., Mexican Authorities Investigating Cross-Border Tunnel” press release, December 2, 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/states/newsrel/2009/sd120209.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Lyudmila Zaitseva, “Organized Crime, Terrorism and Nuclear Trafficking,” *Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 5, (August 2007): 4, <http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccp/publications/OnlineJournal/2007/Aug/zaitsevaAug07.pdf>.

been specifically identified as “using routes that Mexican drug lords control to smuggle contraband and people into the United States to finance operations”<sup>11</sup>

4 reports from the US identify numerous instances of home-grown terrorists/US citizens and implanted terrorists/legal residents providing material support to and laundering money for terrorist organizations.

- This home-grown variety of terrorists comes in many forms, such as Columbus, OH native, Christopher Paul who conspired with Al Qaeda terrorists to use a WMD against Americans at home and abroad<sup>12</sup>
- Another example is David Coleman Headley, a Pakistani American born in the US, accused of giving material support to Lashkar-i-Taiba (a militant Pakistani Islamist group with loose ties to Al Qaeda) and for aiding and abetting the murder of US citizens<sup>13</sup>
- As mentioned, there are also instances of legal residents aiding the terrorist cause. These are individuals intentionally placed in the United States to provide material support to terrorist organizations from within, such as the five leaders of the Holy Land Foundation who funneled more than \$12 million to Hamas<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Sara Carter, “Al Qaeda Eyes Bio Attack from Mexico: Seeks White Militias as Allies,” *Washington Times*, June 3, 2009, 1, 3, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/03/al-qaeda-eyes-bio-attack-via-mexico-border/>.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Justice, “Ohio Man Sentenced to 20 Years for Terrorism Conspiracy to Bomb Targets in Europe and the United States,” press release, February 26, 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/February/09-nsd-171.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Joe Wolverton II, “Study on ‘Homegrown Terrorism’ Encourages Greater Surveillance,” <http://www.thenewamerican.com/index.php/usnews/crime/3147-study-on-qhomegrown-terrorism-qencourages-greater-surveillance>, March 17, 2010. United States Department of State Publication Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2007,” (April 2008: 288), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/105904.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Dallas, “Holy Land Foundation and Leaders Convicted on Providing Material Support to Hamas Terrorist Organization,” press release, May 27, 2009, <http://dallas.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/dl052709.htm>.



- Ali Saleh Kahlah al-Marri, a dual citizen of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, was recruited while at a terrorist training camp to aid the cause from within the US. After agreeing, he was dispatched back to the United States before 9/11 to an Al Qaeda “sleeper cell” awaiting instruction to attack. During his wait, he researched various components to create biological WMDs and locations to attack<sup>15</sup>

As more and more legal residents and US citizens are enticed by the terrorist cause, they lay the foundation for an active terrorist network within the United States with the means and the motivation to inflict harm given the right opportunity.

### **GAPS**

- The most obvious gap in the research available is that there was no solid connection linking the FARC or any other Latin American organization to the Asian terrorist networks with regard to the transportation of WMDs
- Although Sullivan mentions the link between Venezuela and other Latin American countries and Iran, there is no evidence that the relationship has been exploited by terror organizations to date<sup>16</sup>
- Although the Tijuana tunnel was found before it could be utilized, was it commissioned by a terrorist organization to get WMDs into the US? Or was it simply for drug smuggling?

Regarding any other tunnel between Mexico and the US, where does the money go that comes from the smuggled goods, what does it finance?<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Springfield, “Ali-Al-Marri Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to al Qaeda,” press release, April 30, 2009, <http://springfield.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/2009/si043009.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Sullivan, *Latin America: Terrorism Issues*, 1-13.

<sup>17</sup> DEA, “U.S., Mexican Cross-Border Tunnel”

There is a large quantity of disjointed information available on the internet regarding terrorist organizations and their affiliations with drug trafficking organizations; none of which indicates a current WMD link. The absence of a “smoking gun,” however should not prevent the US or other concerned nations from remaining vigilant. It is plausible links such as the ones described above that may eventually prove opportune to the adversary.

## SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Arasli, Jahangir, “The Rising Wind: Is the Caucasus Emerging as a Hub for Terrorism, Smuggling, and Trafficking?” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Volume VI, No. 1, (Spring 2007)

[https://consortium.pims.org/filestore2/download/3688/The%20Rising%20Wind\\_ARASLI.pdf](https://consortium.pims.org/filestore2/download/3688/The%20Rising%20Wind_ARASLI.pdf) (accessed 25 March 2010).

Carter, Sara, “Al Qaeda Eyes Bio Attack from Mexico: Seeks White Militias as Allies,” *Washington Times*, June 3, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/03/al-qaeda-eyes-bio-attack-via-mexico-border/> (accessed 26 Mar 2010)

Department of Justice, “Ohio Man Sentenced to 20 Years for Terrorism Conspiracy to Bomb Targets in Europe and the United States,” press release, February 26, 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/February/09-nsd-171.html> (accessed 24 February 2010).

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Dallas, “Holy Land Foundation and Leaders Convicted on Providing Material Support to Hamas Terrorist Organization,” press release, May 27, 2009, <http://dallas.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/dl052709.htm> (accessed 24 February 2010).

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Springfield, “Ali-Al-Marri Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to al Qaeda,” press release, April 30, 2009, <http://springfield.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/2009/si043009.htm> (accessed 24 February 2010).

Rollins, John, Liana Sun Wyler, and Seth Rosen, *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Threats, Policy, and Considerations*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress R41004, January 25, 2010, [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41004.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41004.pdf) (accessed 10 February 2010).

Sullivan, Mark P., *Latin America: Terrorism Issues*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress RS21049, January 25, 2010, [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RS21049.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RS21049.pdf) (accessed 25 March 2010).

The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and The United States Department of Energy (DOE), “Domestic Export Controls and Maritime Security Workshop in support of the Implementation of UNSCR 1540” June 15-17, 2009, [http://www.stimson.org/MAB/pdf/Kingston\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.stimson.org/MAB/pdf/Kingston_Summary.pdf) (accessed 10 February 2010).

“The Instrument for Stability — Multi-annual Indicative Programme 2009-2011” Commission of the European Communities (Brussels, August 4, 2009), [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/what/security-conflict/documents/ifs\\_2009\\_2011\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/what/security-conflict/documents/ifs_2009_2011_en.pdf) (accessed 25 March 2010).

United States Department of State Publication Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2007,” (April 2008: 288), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/105904.pdf> (accessed 28 March 2010).

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “Three Al Qaeda Associates Arrested on Drug and Terrorism Charges,” press release, December 18, 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr121809.html> (accessed 25 March 2010).

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “U.S., Mexican Authorities Investigating Cross-Border Tunnel” press release, December 2, 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/states/newsrel/2009/sd120209.html> (accessed 28 March 2010).

Wolverton II, Joe, “Study on ‘Homegrown Terrorism’ Encourages Greater Surveillance,” <http://www.thenewamerican.com/index.php/usnews/crime/3147-study-on-qhomegrown-terrorismq-encourages-greater-surveillance>, March 17, 2010 (accessed 25 March 2010).

Wylter, Liana Sun and Nicolas Cook, *Illegal Drug Trade in Africa: Trends and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress R40838, September 30, 2009, [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40838.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40838.pdf) (accessed 25 March 2010).

Zaitseva, Lyudmila, “Organized Crime, Terrorism and Nuclear Trafficking,” *Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 5, (August 2007), <http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccc/publications/OnlineJournal/2007/Aug/zaitsevaAug07.pdf> (accessed 25 March 2010).